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COLOMBIA

SUCCESS STORY

Women Harness Artistry to Turn a Profit

Afro-Colombian women learn to make a living from art



Photo: Chemonics

Candleholders made from gourds by Afro-Colombian women heads-of-household.

“There is really no limit to the beautiful things we can make from the gourds we used to take for granted,” said one woman who switched from harvesting coca to sculpting gourds.

A group of Afro-Colombian women have made a little imagination go a long way. By turning an everyday object into a thing of beauty, they found a market that no one knew existed. With support from USAID, these women are transforming a simple vegetable — the gourd — into two product lines: food packages (for sweets) and decorative objects for the home.

This innovative use of gourds started when about 600 Afro-Colombian women heads-of-household agreed to abandon coca production in order to create a new livelihood with assistance from USAID. Tapping into a readily available resource — gourds — and their own creativity, they began using gourds to make colorful candleholders, sculptures, birdhouses, and other decorative objects, as well as fanciful packages for candy. By painting, sculpting, inlaying, and polishing the gourds, the women transform them into beautiful objects.

“There is really no limit to the beautiful things we can make from the gourds we used to take for granted. We see beauty in so many things. What we make helps us tell our story to the world,” commented one of the women.

To get their products to market, the women teamed up with private investors to create a company, PureArt. The investors own 62 percent of the private company, and the rest is owned by community associations to which the women belong. The company helps market and sell the products to local, national, and international buyers.

The women have also established a showroom where they proudly display colorful, original pieces, and prepare to showcase them at national fairs and trade events.

Sales and demand for the artistic gourds are growing. In fact, the women have negotiated a contract to provide 12,000 containers per week to a Colombian candy company.

The women have high hopes for their enterprise, and enthusiasm from investors shows that they believe the company has great potential. The project directly benefits about 600 women heads-of-household and 200 families engaged in harvesting gourds.